

Sleep Strategy Guide for Hockey Players

Sleeping well directly affects your mental and physical health and the quality of your waking life. Fall short and it can take a serious toll on your daytime energy, productivity, and emotional well-being. Yet many of us regularly toss and turn at night, struggling to get the sleep we need. There is a solution. Making simple but important changes to your daytime routine and bedtime habits can have a profound impact on how well you sleep, leaving you feeling more mentally sharp, more energetic, and more focused during the day.

Getting a good night's sleep may seem like an impossible goal when you're wide awake at 3 a.m., but you have much more control over the quality of your sleep than you probably realize. While the process of going into a different state of consciousness (which is what sleep is) seems a bit mysterious, the process of making sleep significantly more likely is quite straightforward. Just as how you feel during your waking hours often hinges on how well you sleep at night, the quality of your sleeping hours often hinges on how well you prepare for sleep while you are awake.

Why do We Fall Asleep?

Sleep is essential to our functioning as human beings. It is the time where we recuperate physically from the demands of the day and it is also the time where we process all of the information we have encountered while we've been awake. Evolutionarily, we are programmed to be sleepers and thus our drive to sleep accumulates during our waking day; the same way our drive to be awake builds while we sleep. Our body is trying to strike a balance between sleep and wakefulness and it is our sleep drive that is key to this process.

Sleep Drive – Your sleep drive is a physical concept that develops over the course of the day. It is essentially your body's way of balancing out our state of wakefulness and sleepiness. The pressure to sleep builds with every hour that you are awake. During daylight hours, your internal clock generally counteracts this sleep drive by producing an alerting signal that keeps you awake. The longer you are awake, the stronger the sleep drive becomes. Eventually the alerting signal decreases and the drive to sleep wins out. When it does, you fall asleep. Over the course of the day various factors add up to either create a stronger or weaker drive for sleep. You can think of it as a bucket that is looking to be filled and once filled will spill over into sleep. Some behaviours we engage in help fill this bucket whereas others may take away from it. Managing these factors during the day (not just when we get in bed) is the key to successful sleep.

Factors that Prevent the Drive for Sleep

- **Caffeine** – Caffeine is a stimulant that is used to promote alertness. Obviously alertness and sleepiness are not compatible. As more caffeine accumulates during the day our drive

for sleep at night time may be inhibited. Drinking a coffee here and there (especially during the day) will not have much of an impact on your sleep; however, reducing your habitual consumption could be beneficial. Also be aware of other things you might eat or drink and their caffeine content. More caffeine will lead to less sleep drive. Note: If you are a regular coffee drinker and then cut it out totally your sleep will likely be temporarily impeded as you go through the symptoms of withdrawal (nausea, jitteriness, headaches).

- **Alcohol** - Alcohol is commonly used as a sleep aid – mostly because we experience it as a way to unwind the mind and relax. Alcohol is also a prominent part of hockey culture. However, although alcohol can help a person fall asleep more quickly, the quality of your sleep under the influence of alcohol will be compromised. Ingesting more than one or two drinks shortly before bedtime has been shown to cause increased awakenings—and in some cases insomnia—due to the arousal effect the alcohol has as it is metabolized later in the night. Alcohol also tends to worsen the symptoms of sleep apnea, which will further disrupt sleep in people with this breathing disorder. In sum, while you may find that alcohol helps you sleep you need to be aware that while this might be true, the quality and consistency of your sleep will likely be disrupted.
- **Nicotine** – Nicotine (often consumed through cigarettes or more commonly in hockey with chewing tobacco) is also a stimulant, and nicotine side effects can cause insomnia and withdrawal symptoms similar to caffeine. Smoking may also create other sleep disturbances. Research has shown that smokers spend more time sleeping lightly and less time in deep sleep than non-smokers. The biggest differences are found early in the night's sleep, corresponding to the time when the highest levels of nicotine are present in a smoker's blood. More nicotine, regardless of how it is consumed, means more stimulation and more stimulation means less sleep drive.
- **Naps** - Be smart about napping. While napping is a good way to make up for lost sleep and a part of the regular routine for hockey players, if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, napping (especially excessive napping) can make things worse. To promote night time sleep drive eliminate or reduce daytime naps – especially on non-game days. Also, if sleep is an issue for you it is important to fight off after-dinner drowsiness. If you get sleepy way before your bedtime, get off the couch and do something mildly stimulating, such as washing the dishes, calling a friend, walking the dog, or getting things prepared for the next day. If you give in to the drowsiness, you may wake up later in the night and have trouble getting back to sleep – your sleep drive has been reduced and your drive for wakefulness has taken over. If you sleep well regularly don't worry about your naps; having said this, if sleep is a big problem for you curtailing your napping behaviour could be helpful.
- **Avoid big meals at night** - Try to make dinnertime earlier in the evening, and avoid heavy, rich foods within two hours of bed. Spicy or acidic foods can cause stomach

trouble and heartburn so if you are going to eat late be smart about what you are consuming.

Nighttime snacks might help you sleep

For some people, a light snack before bed can help promote sleep. For others, eating before bed can lead to indigestion and make sleeping more difficult. If you need a bedtime snack, try:

- Half a turkey sandwich
- A small bowl of whole-grain, low-sugar cereal
- Milk or yogurt
- A banana

Factors that Help the Drive for Sleep

- **Physical Activity** – Physical activity improves sleep quality and increases sleep duration. This is a no-brainer for you. Exercise may also bolster sleep in other ways, because it reduces stress and tires you out. It can be especially helpful if you are able to exercise outdoors and let your body absorb natural sunlight during the daytime hours. Note: Going to sleep directly after exercise is problematic as your body is stimulated and has been inhibiting your sleep drive. This is a bit of a unique challenge for hockey players given that you play games into the late evening / night. Allow yourself time to transition from physical activity to sleep is. Attempting to transition into sleep within two hours of the completion of a game may just end up being frustrating.
- **Meditation** - One of the keys to effective sleep is the ability to allow our attention to settle into the present and the body. Worries don't exist without thoughts about the future; frustration doesn't exist without thoughts about the past. Thus, the ability to be mindful (paying attention to the now) helps eliminate most of the negative emotions (frustration and anxiety) that can prevent or disrupt sleep pattern. It may be that you have built up a strong sleep drive during the day but can't settle into sleep solely because you are holding onto worries or frustrations. These emotions ignite the stress response which signals to your body that you must stay awake to deal with this "threat". Mindfulness meditation is useful when you are preparing to go to sleep but is also helpful if done at any point during the day because it will help you get better and better at being mindful – paying attention to the now. Mindfulness is a skill, letting go of unhelpful thoughts is a skill, and like all skills it must be practiced. Establishing a mindfulness practice on a daily basis is a vital skill in life and contributes powerfully to sleep.

- It is my belief that the APP Headspace is an excellent option to teach you how to become better at meditating and therefore better at sleeping. There are lots of free features in the app, but there is also a 30 day sleep program that you could have access to. If sleep is an ongoing struggle for you I would recommend that you subscribe to Headspace for a month (probably 10 - 15 dollars) to see what you can get out of it. Following the sleep program on the app will definitely help point you in the direction of better sleep habits. The guy who runs Headspace does work in sports so the content is quite good. It is essential to remember that the purpose of doing this meditation isn't to go to sleep but to pay attention to the instructions and settle into the moment and your body.

- **Establish a Set Bedtime Routine:** I know that having a set plan around bedtime is difficult given the game and practice travels that you are presented with. That is precisely why having a somewhat flexible and brief bedtime routine is actually more essential. I suggest developing a 20 minute plan that you can execute any night of the week no matter if you are at home or at a hotel, if it is a game day or a practice day. This routine must be used a minimum of six days per week. We all need time to transition into sleep. If we go to bed too early because we have cut this time down we may not be in a state that is ready to fall asleep. Your routine could involve brushing your teeth, going to the washroom, flossing (if you are into that), un(dressing) for bed, closing blinds, light stretching, etc. The key is that you have a set routine that you do every time that prepares you and your room for sleep. Have a routine that is flexible enough that you can do it on the road.

Here's an Example of a routine

So let's say you plan to go to bed at 1100pm – that's when you want to start allowing yourself to fall asleep – you might have a plan that looks like this:

10:30 – Send final texts and finish up screens for the night (if you haven't already). Set alarm for morning and turn off all screens and sources of distraction (phone, tv, ipad, etc.). Open Headspace App so it is all set for when you get into bed.

10:35 – Close all blinds and eliminate any potential distractions for sleep

10:36 – Go to the bathroom

10:40 - Wash hands and face, Brush teeth, floss, and any other hygiene related activities (e.g., face cream, or whatever)

10:48 – Change into whatever you are going to wear to bed for sleeping.

10:50 – Do 10 minute mindfulness meditation (decide if you will use headphones or not). With the intention to pay attention to the instructions as closely as possible.

11:00 – Remove headset/earphones (if applicable), turn off phone (no last minute checking of anything and your alarm is already set). Now settle back into bed with a sole focus on your breathing.

NOTE: You could also add things to your routine like – stretching, listening to calming music, reading, and others.

- **Managing Your Exposure to Light** – Another thing that could help you better promote sleep is managing your light exposure. Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone controlled by light exposure that helps regulate your sleep-wake cycle. Your brain secretes more melatonin when it's dark—making you sleepy—and less when it's light—making you more alert. However, many aspects of modern life can alter your body's production of melatonin and shift your circadian rhythm (natural awake-sleep clock). Here are a few keys.

During the day:

Expose yourself to bright sunlight in the morning. The closer to the time you get up, the better. Have your coffee outside, for example, or eat breakfast by a sunny window. The light on your face will help you wake up

Spend more time outside during daylight. Take time to be outside in sunlight, exercise outside, or walk your dog during the day instead of at night. Maximize exposure to light.

Let as much natural light into your home as possible. Keep curtains and blinds open during the day, and try to move your desk or seating areas closer to the window.

At night:

Avoid bright screens within 1-2 hours of your bedtime. The blue light emitted by your phone, tablet, computer, or TV is especially disruptive. You can minimize the impact by using devices with smaller screens, turning the brightness down, or using light-altering software such as flux.

Say no to late-night television. Not only does the light from a TV suppress melatonin, but many programs are stimulating rather than relaxing. Try listening to music or audio books instead. Plus a TV left on could wake you up when you transition into a lighter phase of your sleep cycle.

Don't read with backlit devices. Tablets that are backlit are more disruptive than e-readers that don't have their own light source.

When it's time to sleep, make sure the room is dark. Use heavy curtains or shades to block light from windows, or try a sleep mask. Also consider covering up electronics that emit light. The darker the better.

- **Managing The Sleep Environment** - We've already noted that too much light at night can shift our internal clock and makes restful sleep difficult to achieve. To minimize this effect, nightlights in hallways and bathrooms can be used. White noise machines or fans

could help mask distracting/annoying/unexpected noises. Other background sounds may relax some people, but make sure to keep the volume low. Otherwise, increased frequency of awakenings may prevent transitions to the deeper stages of sleep. Research shows that the ideal temperature range for sleeping varies widely among individuals, so much so that there is no prescribed best room temperature to produce optimal sleep patterns but aiming for 64-70 degrees (F) seem to be comfortable for most people. Generally, people simply sleep best at the temperature that feels most comfortable.



Keep cool
18-21°C (64-70°F) is optimal. Ceiling fans and open windows help regulate temperature and circulate fresh air.

Keep zen
Replace clutter with relaxation - plants, photos, art work.

Keep unplugged
Banish TVs, computers, and any harsh light-emitting devices that can affect your sleep.
The bedroom is for rest and recovery, not counting sheep.

Keep dark
Add block-out blinds where external lights are a problem. When you can't see your hand in front of your face, it's dark enough.

Keep comfortable
Ensure your mattress, sheets and pillows are comfortable and supportive.

Sleep environment GOAL
When you feel relaxed, at peace and can sleep for a minimum of 7 hours consistently in your bedroom.

- **Wake Up Time** – As much as you can you want to establish a consistent wake up time (even if you had a bad night of sleep the night before. Having a firm wake up time will help you set the boundaries for sleep and your sleep schedule will adjust to it.

Sleep Mindset

Perhaps one of the biggest factors that takes away from our ability to sleep is how we think about sleep in general or the million other things we think about when we are supposed to be going to sleep. A strong sleep drive can be inhibited by a pattern of thinking and worrying that keeps the mind from being directed toward sleep.

Challenge worries and thoughts that fuel insomnia

It is helpful to challenge the negative attitudes about sleep that you've developed over time. The key is to recognize self-defeating thoughts and replace them with more realistic ones.

Challenging self-defeating thoughts that fuel insomnia

Self-defeating thought:	Sleep-promoting comeback:
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Challenging self-defeating thoughts that fuel insomnia	
Unrealistic expectations: I should be able to sleep well every night like a normal person. I shouldn't have a problem!	Lots of people struggle with sleep from time to time. I will be able to sleep with practice.
Exaggeration: It's the same every single night, another night of sleepless misery.	Not every night is the same. Some nights I do sleep better than others.
Catastrophizing: If I don't get some sleep, I'll tank my presentation and jeopardize my job.	I can get through the presentation even if I'm tired. I can still rest and relax tonight, even if I can't sleep.
Hopelessness: I'm never going to be able to sleep well. It's out of my control.	Insomnia can be cured. If I stop worrying so much and focus on positive solutions, I can beat it.
Fortune telling: It's going to take me at least an hour to get to sleep tonight. I just know it.	I don't know what will happen tonight. Maybe I'll get to sleep quickly if I use the strategies I've learned.

- Always keep in mind that there are recuperative benefits to simply lying in bed relaxing that would be beneficial even if you didn't go to sleep. Know that at least 50% of the work of sleep is done simply by relaxing peacefully in bed.
- You can't make yourself go to sleep – you are best to let yourself go to sleep. Thus, the intention of the bedtime routine, meditation, and so on isn't to make you go to sleep, but to simply point your body in that direction. The mindfulness – paying attention to the now – is about paying attention not going to sleep.
- Sleep is something we allow to happen not something we make happen – by putting pressure on going to sleep we make going to sleep less likely. Sleep will find you if you make yourself available.
- If you are constantly checking to see if you are asleep – you are awake. This is one of the biggest problems we have whenever we are implementing strategies to help us sleep – we expect and check for immediate results and if we don't fall asleep right away we become

preoccupied with “I’m still awake – this isn’t working either”. Again, adding pressure to going to sleep doesn’t help us go to sleep.

What Should I do if I Wake Up in the Middle of the Night

It’s normal to wake briefly during the night but if you’re having trouble falling back asleep. Our sleep cycle varies throughout the night from deep to light (90minute cycles) and when we are in the “light phase” we may enter a state of wakefulness. If this happens to you, notice it and know that it isn’t a big deal. The following strategies may help you fall back to sleep.

Stay out of your head. Hard as it may be, try not to stress over your inability to fall asleep again, because that stress only encourages your body to stay awake. To stay out of your head, focus on the feelings in your body or practice breathing exercises. Take a breath in, then breathe out slowly while saying or thinking the word, “Ahhh.” Take another breath and repeat.

Make relaxation your goal, not sleep. If you find it hard to fall back asleep, try a relaxation technique such as visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation, which can be done without even getting out of bed. Even though it’s not a replacement for sleep, relaxation can still help rejuvenate your body.

Do a quiet, non-stimulating activity. If you’ve been awake for more than 15 minutes, get out of bed and do a quiet, non-stimulating activity, such as reading a book. Keep the lights dim and avoid screens so as not to cue your body that it’s time to wake up.

Postpone worrying and brainstorming. If you wake during the night feeling anxious about something, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone worrying about it until the next day when it will be easier to resolve. Similarly, if a great idea is keeping you awake, make a note of it on paper and fall back to sleep knowing you’ll be much more productive after a good night’s rest.

Sleep Medication

We live in a fix-it age where quick fixes are all the rage. As long as there’s been commercialism, people have been drawn to everything from diets to hair tonics that promise to make us feel better and feel better about ourselves. Some work. Some don’t. And then there are the products that work, but at a price. To users of pharmaceuticals, that price is the side effect.

If you’re an insomniac or occasionally have difficulty sleeping, it’s tempting to reach for the sleeping pills. Why? Because sleep is a critical bodily need. Deprive the body of sleep, and it begins to break down. In some ways, sleeping pills are medical miracle. They work, and they work fast.

But, sleeping pills also have their set of disadvantages, including side effects that range from mild to serious risks to one's health. These side effects include:

Burning sensations, Changes in appetite, Dizziness, Headaches, Stomach Issues, and others.

On the dark side of the spectrum, there are the risks generally associated with overuse or overdose, including unwanted behaviors, such as parasomnia, which involves walking around, calling people, or even driving while in a sleep state. If alcohol or other substance or medication has been consumed, taking a sleeping pill could be fatal.

But even careful, intermittent use of sleeping pills over time can lead to an addiction where the user can't sleep without them. This renders the person not only more vulnerable to the side effects mentioned, but with casual use often comes a sense that breaking certain rules (like not having a drink) is okay

Should you steer clear of sleeping medication altogether? Not necessarily. But never take one—even when it's herbal or over-the-counter—without first consulting with a doctor. And don't forget, there are always other, safer non-medicinal methods to try first, including all of those things mentioned above.